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POSITION PAPER FOR 2007 FARM BILL

Alfalfa is planted on 25 million acres in the U.S. and ranks as the third most valuable crop produced by U.S. farmers. Production of alfalfa has numerous benefits to both agriculture and society generally. High forage yield potential and high forage quality has earned alfalfa the title "Queen of the Forages". There are also numerous environmental benefits of alfalfa cultivation, the combination of which make it unique among the major crops currently grown in the U.S. The National Alfalfa Alliance believes these significant benefits to agriculture should be recognized, and the inclusion of alfalfa in crop rotations should be encouraged in the next Farm Bill.

Environmental and secondary economic benefits

- *Alfalfa is a perennial crop which is seeded in solid stands.* Soil erosion is a "fact of life" for annual row crops in most of the U.S. Soil erosion reduces water quality of streams and lakes and threatens the long term sustainability of our soil resources. Alfalfa provides perennial ground cover over virtually the entire soil surface, reducing potential soil losses by up to 80% compared with annual row cropping systems.
- *Alfalfa fixes atmospheric nitrogen and requires no supplemental nitrogen fertilizer.* In a crop rotation alfalfa contributes up to 100lbs/A of nitrogen to the following crop. About 4.8 million acres of alfalfa are rotated to another crop each year in the U.S. Using a conservative nitrogen credit of 100 lb/acre to the subsequent crop, 292,000 tons of anhydrous ammonia equivalent are saved each year as a result of alfalfa in the crop rotation. This equals over 8 trillion BTUs of fossil fuel energy from natural gas. A crop rotation system that includes alfalfa should be part of an agricultural program for U.S. energy independence.
- *Alfalfa has a deep and extensive root system.* Alfalfa roots penetrating up to 50ft deep have been documented. This is significantly deeper than the root penetration of annual crops commonly planted in the U.S. This allows alfalfa to tap water and nutrients unavailable to other crops, making it one of the most drought-tolerant of crops. The deep and extensive root system also helps improve soil tilth, benefiting crops following alfalfa in a crop rotation. Alfalfa production also decreases nitrogen losses to the environment. Fertilizer nitrogen losses to ground water through leaching and to surface water through erosion are up to 90% less in alfalfa than in a typical corn cropping system.

Support for existing Federal programs

Although there are no federal programs that provide direct support for alfalfa producers, alfalfa growers benefit from existing crop insurance programs. This opportunity needs to be preserved. NASS reporting for alfalfa planted acres and ARS research programs for alfalfa and alfalfa seed production support numerous stakeholders in the alfalfa industry and should be continued at current levels.

Alternative uses for alfalfa

The environmental benefits of alfalfa make it an excellent candidate for alternative uses (e.g. biofuels, bioprocessing, and value-added proteins). Today virtually all of the Federally-funded

research in these areas is devoted to three crops: corn, soybean and switchgrass. Corn and soybean culture deplete, rather than enrich our soil resources while corn and switchgrass production require energy intensive nitrogen fertilizer.

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Alfalfa produces more protein per acre than any other U.S. crop. This makes it an ideal candidate for the production of value-added feed or industrial proteins. It is also a rich source of phenolic compounds with potential health benefits (e.g. lutein and various anti-oxidants). Private research is underway to harvest and process these value-added compounds from alfalfa. This makes alfalfa ligno-cellulose a perfect bi-product/substrate for biofuels.

The National Alfalfa Alliance wants to see more federal research dollars devoted to optimizing systems for exploiting alternative uses for alfalfa.

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